

Pay It Forward
Youth Sunday/Transfiguration Sunday
February 11, 2018
Youth Sunday - Beth Carroll

Text: 2 Kings 2:1-12
2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Have you ever been blessed with an inheritance? Either something intrinsically valuable, like a trust fund, or valuable because of what it means? When I was 7, my grandmother died and left me her collection of perfumes. Though they weren't worth a lot of money, I loved the way they looked on my dresser and how the smell instantly took me to the feel and smell of her hugs. I loved that I could spray a bit on me and have that potent memory with me the entire day. I also got my height, curly hair, and stubbornness from her. I didn't ask for any of these gifts from her, but they were given to me all the same. Though the scent of my grandmother's perfume has long since faded away, her legacy, or mantle if you will, is with me every time I try to find pants that are long enough, battle my hair in the humidity, or give my loved ones the "silent treatment", when I should say "I'm sorry" after I've lost an argument.

The core of who we are from our genes, to our habits, to our values, and our character are not as unique as we often like to think of them. Often the things that most define us are mantles passed on to us from our parents, grandparents, mentors, and friends and they are currency that we will pay forward to those we love and have influence over too.

"Mantle" is a word we've heard several times this morning, starting with Pastor Jill's explanation with the children a few minutes ago. You probably have an idea of the modern sense of what a mantle is, but what did it mean in the Old Testament? It literally was a cloak or a robe; similar to what I have on, although I am guessing wearing a white one on a daily basis probably wasn't a favorite in the era before Clorox bleach. Prophets in particular wore them as a sign of their calling, or a sign of the presence of God's spirit. Elijah, the prophet we read about today, wore one. In fact 2 verses after our reading in 2 Kings, when Elijah disappears, his mantle was left behind and Elisha picks it up and uses it to part the waters they had just crossed, a sign that God's spirit is now with Elisha. This sounds like a scene at the end of a movie, doesn't it? Like the movie about Elijah

has ended with a cliff hanger and we have to wait 2 more years for George Lucas to come out with a sequel to find out what happens with Elisha?

Over the past few weeks, our youth have reflected on these sorts of mantles or legacies, prompted by today's Old testament narrative with the prophet Elijah passing on his mantle to his spiritual son, Elisha. Elisha has spent many years silently watching Elijah, observing how loyally Elijah serves God and Israel, both with words and acts of encouragement, but even with scourging judgment, to keep Israel and the kings who ruled them loyal to their caring God. With this mantle comes all of the lessons Elisha has learned from Elijah. What sorts of qualities did Elijah have that impacted Elisha? Elijah was courageous in confronting powerful and dangerous people like King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, faithful in following God alone, even when he was depressed, and compassionate in his obedience to feeding a poor widow, as God directed him. These are inspiring and life-giving qualities Elisha surely observed in Elijah, but these are not the only qualities inherent in Elijah.

Elijah was complicated. Elijah is like any of us, even with his awe-inspiring strengths, he possesses equally awe-inspiring liabilities. He fearfully runs away from Jezebel after he confronts her. He has a flair for the dramatic when he laments how alone he is when God asks him what he is still doing in the wilderness, after fleeing Jezebel. Though he is compassionate in caring for the widow who is almost out of food, he is bossy and abrupt with her when she is understandably worried she will starve to death if she gives Elijah the rest of her food. Surely Elijah knows all of this about himself at the end of his ministry when we see him repeatedly ask his protégé Elisha to leave him alone. I know many of us older adults with older kids can relate to the feeling of looking back at your years of parenting only to realize that our mistakes are just as formational as our strengths. The good news is that those whom you've parented or mentored will replicate you. The bad news is that those whom you've parented or mentored will replicate you. How many of us on our bad days would rather send loved ones away rather than have them be scarred by our mistakes?

(Youth line up in aisle)

As we were processing these lessons the past few weeks, we thought about the mantles we've inherited from our loved ones and reflected on the life-giving ones, as well as the challenging ones. Our youth asked themselves, **(begin passing mantle forward)** "what have we been given? What has formed us?" So as

a tangible act of meditation, you can see we have created our own mantle. Each of our youths participated in a writing exercise where they thought through 3 questions. The first was “Think about ‘mantles’ you have received in your life in a positive way: i.e. things that you value or care about that have been passed on to you from parents, grandparents, friends, teachers, coaches” These were mantles like... (Quote #1)...and...(Quote #2). As you can tell, we have some very thoughtful and reflective young people in our midst. If you look closely you can see that we have summarized our positive attributes into one word descriptions, which are placed all over our mantle. There are words like “Character, Perseverance, Humility, Compassion, and Stick-to-itiveness”.

What a lovely mantle, right? Well...plot twist. Just like with Elijah and Elisha, some of the mantles we receive are well...complicated. (Turn mantle over) The second question the youth considered was to “Think about ‘mantles’ you have received in your life that have been difficult: i.e. things in your life, your family, people around that have been difficult or hurtful” These mantles were things like (Quote #3)... and...(Quote #4)...and (Quote #5?). And again, we have words on this mantle like “Anger, Gossip, Loneliness, and Impulsivity.

So what are we to do with this mixed bags of traits we are given by those we love? Does the difficult side cancel out the positive side? Does the recognition of the fractured parts of ourselves that we pass on to those we love make us want to push the Elishas in our lives away to “spare them”? Our passage in 2 Corinthians says “the ‘lower case’ god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” A way to look at our mantles in perspective of this passage is that we can be so overwhelmed by the flaws of others and ourselves that we fail to remember that the glory of Christ makes all things new. God says “Let Light shine out of the darkness”. God’s spirit in our hearts is what directs us or gives us our knowledge. Meaning that which we thought was meant only for brokenness can be repurposed for good, even as we carry a mantle that is positive and complicated. This passage in 2 Corinthians is an odd encouragement because it teaches us that while suffering and brokenness are to be expected in our Christian walk, God will make that which is dark into light. Even the negative words on our mantles can form us for good.

This brings us to the third question we wrestled with, “Describe a positive “mantle” in your life that you’d like to pass on:
i.e. what values, passions, commitments do you want people to receive from your life? (Begin passing the mantle again and pass out cards to congregants)

So each of our youths have thought about what it is that they intentionally would like to pass on to others and in particular to YOU. The mantle that has been passed on to them and that which they are carrying forward to their church includes “justice, hard-work, joy, hospitality, openness, strength, devotion, patience, and much much more”. These are wonderful gifts of God that are given to them, despite all of the challenges they have faced. As the youths pass these gifts on to you, let us pray that God will bless both the gifts in our lives and the struggles that all will be used for the glory of God.

God bless each person here. Bless the gifts we use and the gifts we neglect. Bless our good days and our bad days. Make us vessels that receive your gifts with openness and generosity. In Jesus’s name, Amen.